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AUTHOR Wilson, Stephen; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Many people hope that the unique skills and perspectives of anthropologists can help them to make the contributions to social programs that have eluded other social scientists. Ethnography promises to make a significant contribution to evaluation of educational innovations. Before this promise can be realized, however, there are many practical and theoretical problems to be solved. An attempt is made to aid this process by candidly sharing and analyzing some experiences in this area of applied anthropology. The use of the methodology and findings using ethnography in evaluating an innovative program of the New School in Cleveland Heights, Ohio is discussed. The evaluation model used to clarify the context in which ethnography is used is described first. The experience of using ethnography is also discussed from two focuses: (1) problems that arose from inherent mismatches between the fundamental assumptions and processes of ethnography and those of evaluation; and (2) problems that arose from the particular ways the evaluation plans were put into practice. (Author/DEP)

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THE USE OF ETHNOGRAPHY IN EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION

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Author's statement

The Center for New Schools (CNS), 431 S. Dearborn, Chicago, Illinois 60605 is a not for profit organization trying to bring about educational change by working with community groups and with people trying to establish exemplary learning environments. One part of this work is the attempt to develop research and evaluation activities which support the processes of innovation. This attempt has been partially supported by the Carnegie Corporation and National Institute of Education.

Dr. Stephen Wilson had major responsibility for writing this paper with the assistance of Drs. Emile Scheppers, Thomas Wilson, Donald Moore and Phyllis Wilson. Jan Aspelin, Betsy Rubin and Neil Gould, all associated with New School, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, also made significant contributions.

Researchers responsible for using and conducting evaluation studies of social and educational programs have grown increasingly interested in the use of "anthropological" methods.¹ This interest has arisen out of both a dissatisfaction with the information that is produced by traditional evaluation and a recognition of the uniqueness and importance of the kind of data that can be gathered by participant observation (i.e., naturalistic-qualitative methods--see Bruyn, 1966; Barker, 1968; CNS, 1974). Our several years experience in conducting evaluation studies--mostly on innovative educational programs--have demonstrated that these methods do indeed gather essential and valuable information. (See also Smith and Pohland, 1972; Ianni and Caesar, 1973; and Wolcott, 1974.) Our experience has also acquainted us, however, with many problems--both of theory and of practice--which result from mixing ethnography and evaluation.

The prospects for ethnographic evaluation becoming a significant tool in the development of social and educational programs depends on the recognition and confrontation of these problems. By analyzing our experiences in using ethnography in evaluation--specifically the evaluation conducted for the "New School" innovative program of the Cleveland Heights, Ohio schools--we hope to further this process of refining methods for social scientists to contri-

bute to social change.

First we describe the evaluation model to clarify the context in which ethnography was used, briefly explaining the theoretical rationale for its use and the specific functions we hoped it would serve in the evaluation. Then we will analyze the actual experience of using ethnography, from two focuses: 1. Problems that arose from inherent mismatches between the fundamental assumptions and processes of ethnography and those of evaluation and 2. Problems that arose from the particular ways we have had to put the evaluation plans into practice (e.g., how the evaluation was funded). Our illustrations will be drawn from our experiences in the evaluation of New School.

I. Description of Evaluation Model, Rationale for Using Ethnography

Evaluation research (also known as program evaluation and, in education, as curriculum evaluation) has grown increasingly sophisticated.² Evaluators are growing more ambitious in their intentions to gather comprehensive information. (For more about these developments, a full discussion of which is out of place here, see Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus, 1969; Weiss, 1971; Stufflebeam et al., 1973; Provus, 1972; Taylor and Cowley, 1972; any issue of Evaluation Comment.)

The evaluation model which we focus on grew out of our

experiences working with alternative schools and was developed to be tested in a specific school setting. It represents a synthesis of several newer perspectives in evaluation. Although it is inappropriate to describe the model in detail in this paper (see CNS, forthcoming, for this description), it is necessary to outline some of its essential characteristics to explain the context in which the ethnographer-evaluator worked. We will briefly describe the concrete activities of the New School evaluation and then consider the following principles and rationales underlying the use of ethnography in evaluation--formative evaluation, process analysis-goal free evaluation, and assessment of subtle outcomes.

To realize the goals of evaluation (goals which will be detailed in later sections), CNS undertook the following activities at New School.³ As an outside evaluation team,⁴ we worked with an evaluation committee of teachers and students to identify the school's process and outcome goals and to learn what the committee thought the focus of the evaluation should be. Additional focuses were derived from interviews with administrators and staff not on the committee, student suggestions during an all-school meeting, inspection of documents relevant to the innovations being studied (e.g., original proposals, teacher memoes), observations made during an initial on-site visit, and CNS experi-

ences in similar settings.

Data was collected by multiple methods (interviews, questionnaires, observation). Participants were involved in the design and activity of data collection wherever possible. CNS trained a selected group of participants in interviewing and data analysis. Two interview sequences were planned, but the second was not completed because of scheduling difficulties within the school.

CNS worked with school participants (through regular consultations with the evaluation committee, a two-day workshop during the school year which involved the whole school population, and presence at a significant year-end planning meeting) to help them digest evaluation information and to work toward their goals. CNS also prepared a final comprehensive report analyzing events related to the working of the innovations⁵ in the school.

A part-time, student participant observer (trained by the CNS evaluation team) joined the school community⁶ from the beginning of the evaluation. The use of ethnography was essential in the accomplishment of the over-all goals of the evaluation--i.e., formative feedback, providing a kind of information helpful to participants in reaching their goals, analysis of what happened in a way that would be useful both to participants and to future adaptors of the innovation, and obtaining information about subtle changes in student behavior.

In the following pages we elaborate on these goals-- formative feedback, process analysis and goal free evaluation, assessment of subtle or unintended outcomes.

1. Formative evaluation, relevance to the reality of participants

Formative evaluation is the attempt to use feedback derived from the evaluation to help shape on-going programs and to help participants reach their goals. Evaluators have a responsibility to the people in the educational institutions being studied to help them to be successful in their endeavors. The people in the settings have a right to feel that the evaluation is theirs and that they can help to decide on the focuses of the evaluation. In fact, they should feel like co-evaluators. The evaluators fulfill this obligation by working with the people in the setting to help them to define their goals and expectations in relation to the innovation, by gathering information relevant to the way the innovation works, by feeding this information back to the people in the schools, and by helping the participants to digest the information and change their organization. Furthermore, the evaluators' links with the developers of the innovations and with other schools who have implemented similar innovations, makes them a good source of assistance related to the participant's goals.

Ethnography is particularly well suited to these formative functions of the evaluator since learning the frameworks by which the participants in a setting interpret events is a fundamental task of the participant observer. Many of the procedures used by anthropologists are designed to help the researchers temporarily suspend their own perspectives and to understand the daily life of the setting they are studying in the same way the participants do.

Practitioners in schools often complain that evaluators and researchers who work with schools do not understand the "realities" of schools and classrooms. As a result, many of the suggestions derived from research and from standard evaluation design are dismissed as being irrelevant to educational realities. The data gathered by ethnographic evaluation attempts to avoid this shortcoming since acquaintance with the daily realities of the participants is intrinsic to ethnography.

The formative evaluation that we have been describing is a relatively new and increasingly popular aspect of evaluation. Frequently formative evaluation plans have paid little attention to how the information would be used. Planners have assumed that data related to program goals will have obvious usefulness, and their responsibility ended with the collection and communication of information.

Those who have studied organizations and the process of planned change (Havelock, 1969; Bennis, Benne and Chin, 1969; Sarason, 1971; Shmuck, 1972; Lortie, 1969) realize that this kind of information is not automatically translated into action. In order to have an impact, facilitators of change must know as much as possible about the structure of an organization and offer information in the right form to the right people at the right time.

Participant observation is a potentially valuable source of this analytical information about the structure and dynamics of organizations. This understanding can be used to guide the evaluators in their attempts to use the information gathered to help the participants reach their goals. Furthermore, as the evaluation team takes action to help accomplish the desired changes, participant observers can monitor the effectiveness of these attempts, analyze successes and failures, and make suggestions for more effective strategies in the future.

2. Process analysis, goal free evaluation

Evaluations of educational programs are usually designed in a very limited fashion--oriented toward giving information only about the specific setting being studied. It makes more sense, however, to think of evaluation as an integral

part of the chain of processes relating to the development, dissemination and utilization of educational innovations. This means that each evaluation endeavor should provide comprehensive information helpful to those who may try to implement the innovation in other settings--i.e., information that helps them decide how this innovation is appropriate to their circumstances or what kinds of changes will have to be made. This information should include data about the day-to-day functioning of the innovative program--e.g., how it was actually implemented, how it accomplished what it did, and why it didn't fulfill other expectations. Because of its flexibility and comprehensiveness, participant observation has long been used to study such detailed social processes in communities (Vidich and Bensman, 1958) and in organizations (Scott, 1965).

The open-endedness and theoretical flexibility of ethnography also equips it to address some other concerns of evaluators. Stake (1967), Scriven (1967), Eisner (1967), and Provus (1967) have criticized traditional evaluation approaches which prematurely limit the kind of information collected. Stake has suggested that evaluators must try to look at costs and unintended outcomes as well as assessing intended outcomes. Similarly, Scriven has suggested that evaluators take a "goal free" approach in order to be sensitive to important information that might be outside the

original plans of the program. Eisner points out that a narrow focus on objectives often hampers understanding of educational programs. Provus sees evaluation as serving functions outside the immediate program being evaluated and hence sees the need for collecting information about many aspects of the program. This comprehensive information is also essential in serving the formative function.

The nature of innovation in complex social systems means that there are likely to be consequences and implications that are difficult to anticipate beforehand. Since they cannot be anticipated, it is impossible to plan to measure them as is required in standard experimental design. Yet this unanticipated effects are important to assess, both for the purpose of making comprehensive judgements about new programs and for providing information necessary to those who seek to implement the innovation in other settings.

Ethnography has long been concerned with the problem of not knowing the relevant variables before entering a setting. As a consequence, qualitative researchers have developed systematic inductive methods of letting their concepts and theory emerge from on-going contact with the setting. (See Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Bruyn, 1966; Smith, 1971.) These methods, known as qualitative, grounded research,

are thus especially appropriate for use by evaluators who have criticized the narrow focuses of traditional evaluators.⁷

3. Subtle outcomes, difficult or impossible to measure

Evaluative studies typically rely on measurement by tests and other psychometric instruments for information about achievement of desired outcomes in studied behaviors. There has been, however, a growing discontent with these instruments. There are many methodological problems for their use in evaluation (e.g., timing of test administration, design characteristics of the instruments, see Porter, 1973). Many practitioners feel that behavior in these kinds of specialized data collection situations (tests, questionnaires, etc.) is not closely related to usual daily behavior (see Jackson, 1968, on teacher distrust of tests). Much social science research has similarly pointed out the artifact produced by standard techniques of social psychological research (Deutscher, 1965; Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1966). Naturalistic observation (Willems and Rauch, 1969; Barker, 1968) and unobtrusive measurement are increasingly seen as important tools for social scientists and evaluators to use when they want information about changes in student behavior in everyday contexts rather than information about performance in specified measurement situations.

The nature of the outcome goals of many innovative educational programs also raises doubts about the adequacy of traditional measurements. Many of these new programs aim to bring about subtle changes in higher level cognitive and affective student behavior--e.g., critical thinking, sense of self-worth, attitude toward school, vocational orientation, ethnic identification, etc. Psychometricians admit that their instruments are weak in assessing these kinds of qualities.

For the sake of convenience, rather than trying to assess these difficult-to-measure outcomes, traditional evaluators use whatever devices are available--e.g., standardized tests. This tendency often results in an emphasis in evaluation that is not reflective of the true emphasis of the programs being studied. Evaluators have a responsibility to find ways to provide information even about these elusive outcomes.

Although usually not used for these purposes, participant observation offers hope of resolving some of these problems in assessment. Field observers, because of their continuous, wide ranging, relatively unobtrusive presence in a setting can obtain information about day-to-day behavior instead of only specialized test behavior. Furthermore, the customary research procedures of this methodology--e.g., cultivation of informal interpersonal relations, presence

at crucial events and sensitivity to a multitude of behavior signs--offer a possibility for evaluators to collect data about higher level cognitive behavior and affective orientations. Moreover, participant observation data can also be used as a firm, grounded basis on which to design quantitative approaches.

Potential

This section has presented several rationales for including anthropological techniques in evaluation studies. There are many fortunate fits between qualities intrinsic to the ethnographic research process and the purposes and needs of evaluation. In spite of this great potential, however, ethnography has rarely been used for these purposes. Much more development is needed before ethnography can fulfill its promise in these contexts.

II. Realities of using ethnography in evaluation

Our purpose in this article is to identify some areas in which this development must occur. Our experiences conducting ethnographically oriented evaluations of innovative educational programs have alerted us to many difficulties.⁸ Some seem to arise from inherent conflict between the processes of evaluation and the processes of

participant observation; others arise out of the particular choices we have had to make in putting the evaluation plans into practice. (Note that these latter difficulties, while not as inevitable as the former, will nonetheless confront any evaluators faced with the same financial, temporal, and geographic constraints as we were.)

A. Inherent difficulties

1. Formative feedback

Social scientists have always experienced difficulty with the ethical questions of their responsibilities to the people they study. Today, many organizations and communities no longer welcome researchers and evaluators unless they can demonstrate that their work will result in direct benefits to the community being studied. The intensity and intimacy of the participant observer's interaction with the community he studies means that he is confronted more directly with these ethical demands than are other kinds of researchers. Furthermore, the insensitivity of participant observers in the past--i.e., those who have taken a "colonial" stance toward other cultures and toward minority cultures within our own society--has made this kind of research an especially popular target of criticism.

Anthropologists have sought ways to be useful to the people they study, to serve the communities which for so long were their subjects (Wax, 1974). Formative evaluation seems an especially appropriate way to be of service.

Our experiences have demonstrated that this marriage of ethnography and feedback is not easily accomplished. Certain requirements of successful ethnography work against the formative evaluation function.

The richness of participant observation as a source of information derives in part from the special status of the field researcher. In undisguised observation, the researcher works to be accepted in a special liminal role. He avoids being identified with any particular group within the community or with any particular position on important issues. This non-advocacy is essential so that participants from all sectors of the community and with all kinds of views will feel that they have a sympathetic ear and are willing to be informants and respondents.

Inevitably, in all ethnographic studies, the nature of social interaction means that the researcher cannot really avoid making some comments that offend or distance some participants. His special role of non-advocate, however, leads participants to be willing to discount the occasional distancing comment.

The special combined role of formative evaluator and ethnographer changes this. The researcher wants to provide information useful to the community, and the community expects to receive this information. The evaluator-ethnographer faces a dilemma that "pure" ethnographers do

not. His dual role requires him to do things that will most likely limit future information collection in significant ways.

To illustrate, we quote excerpts from three papers written by the field worker, a teacher and a student at New School. The field researcher was aware of his difficult dual role.

(Field worker) There was a tendency for members of the community to have me settle disputes on some issues which were emotionally charged. One example of this took place at a confrontation between four students and a teacher. The students contended that they should be given complete control of all New School decision making, including curriculum selection and school policies.

The teacher contended that because of state requirements for curriculum and the school board's authority regarding policy making, the students were not in a position to be in complete control of these things. The frustration built on both sides of the argument until one of the students turned to me and asked, "You've been observing us, don't you think the students of New School could handle these decisions?" It was obvious that I could not support either side without jeopard-

dizing my effectiveness in future interviews. Equally obvious was the unreasonable position of the students in light of the facts. My reply both praised the ability of New School students to function as a decision-making body and emphasized the circumstances which would make their proposition impractical.

Some of the participants realized the difficulties for the anthropologist, but they had engaged the evaluation team with the expectation of feedback. They wanted to improve their program and were eager to get information. Thus they were unsatisfied with the reticence of the participant observer.

(Teacher at New School) No doubt the question of active role is something of a dilemma for a participant observer, but I think it is possible for an anthropologist to actually maintain objective distance without appearing to do so. This may be a rare ability. Regarding feedback, this may also be a dilemma for an anthropologist, since anthropologists are not especially interested in effecting change in the community they are working with. However, since positive change is the point of the whole evaluation program, as far as the New School community is concerned, I think that continual, detailed feedback is important. M has not given us enough of this.

Some students were even more adamant in their complaints about the lack of feedback. Their judgements about participant observation were made primarily in terms of amount of feedback.

(Student) The majority of the students felt that M has not done an adequate job as our participant observer. Although all of them were willing to entertain the idea that he was being helpful to the outside evaluation team in their part of the evaluation, it was felt that he was not being directly helpful to us.

Even the students who felt that M was doing a good job because they saw him around, going to classes, etc., and he was always taking notes on what was going on and what people said, had not gotten any feedback from him. Most of them were nice enough to feel that this was due to the fact that they had never really asked him for any. The students who had asked him for general feedback, however, felt that their question was never really answered. (The same thing was thought by these students to be true of the evaluation in general, especially the evaluation workshop.) For the most part, people seem either not to know what M is doing--an interesting comment in itself, or to feel that the job he has been doing is of very little value to us.

The expectation of feedback is a new element that must be integrated into the role of the ethnographer-evaluator. Other individuals can try to take over the responsibility for converting the information into feedback (as is described later), but the community continues to link the ethnographer with returning information. Judgements about evaluation are often made in terms of how useful and how speedy the feedback is.

2. Sacred cows

Traditionally one of the outstanding strengths of participant observation as a methodology has been its ability to help researchers to learn facts about social interaction in communities, facts that are usually hidden even from the participants. The ethnographer strives to look at events without taking anything for granted, and he tries not to be locked into any particular perspective.

These qualities of participant observation can contribute beneficially to evaluation. The non-accomplishment of program goals can often be traced to what Smith (1974) has called latent process--unacknowledged organizational patterns of behavior. At the same time that people want to know what is frustrating their ambitions, they may also want to avoid this information. Survival in an organization often

leads participants to minimize their awareness.

Participant observers are in a unique position to be useful by becoming a "conscience" for the community. They cultivate an awareness of and sympathy with the goals and mores of the people they work with so they are not strangers to the meaning frameworks of the participants. At the same time, however, they maintain an essential distance from these goals and mores. They remain forever partial outsiders. As a result, they can point to sacred cows and to facts about the community that participants are reluctant to acknowledge.

The participant observer in his evaluation search to identify which elements of the program support or inhibit realization of desired goals has a high probability of identifying these blotted out or never revealed facts. For some issues he may identify particular persons or groups that work against desired goals. The nature of these discoveries poses several dilemmas for an ethnographer-evaluator who seeks to give formative feedback to the community: He must carefully weigh the canons of confidentiality against the community's need for information. Participants may feel a resentment that the field researcher, who shares so much of the life of the participants and seems so sympathetic, should commit the sacrilege of questioning the sacred cows. At the same time that they have been open and "progressive" enough to see the value of an objective viewpoint, they may

also be defensive about what the observer sees. These negative reactions can lead to withholding information from the observer, a hostility toward the person, a discounting of his contributions and an inability to use his feedback.

We can illustrate by describing such events at New School. The field worker identified a phenomenon which some students called the "power clique." In this alternative school which claimed to want democratic decision making--all teachers and students having a voice-- a small group of students and teachers seemed to be actually dominating the decisions. Other teachers and students resented the fact and complained to each other and to the observer, but could not or did not organize to express their feelings. The "power clique" was aware that they were making many of the decisions, but they felt that everyone had an opportunity to participate since all meetings and announcements were public. They insisted that those who did not participate were unwilling to put in the desired work and had no one to blame but themselves for their lack of participation.

The decision making process in alternative schools is too complex to discuss completely here. (For more details, see CNS, 1972, 1972b; Wilson, 1972.) There are grains of truth in both perspectives represented in the example. The

field worker on this project felt that the "power clique" phenomenon had ramifications beyond decision making--e.g., influencing how various students became involved in the learning program at the school. He attempted to communicate the feelings of the non-participants and to alert the power clique to the unrecognized ways in which they were contributing to the non-participation of others.

The participant observer learned early in the evaluation that he was being identified with the power clique (who also formed the school's teacher-student evaluation committee) and that this association was limiting his access to information.

(Field worker's report) The specific incident which focused attention on my association with the committee occurred when I was questioning a student after class. I had overheard this student complaining with two others prior to the class about the "haphazard presentation of the subject (material)" by the student-leader of the course. When I questioned the student after the class, she said that she was happy with the course and that she couldn't think of any improvements for the class sessions. Not wanting to embarrass her, I didn't confront her with her earlier statement. Several weeks later it became apparent that the reason some students were reluctant to be completely candid

with me was that I was associated with what they termed the "power clique."

The observer felt that it was essential to learn more about the perspectives of the non-power clique and to communicate this information to the power clique for the sake of improving the program. He set out to discover which students were not showing up at school and to contact them. He spent time with the teachers who were not part of the active group. Although the power clique acknowledged the existence of uninvolved people and claimed to want to know more about why they were uninvolved, the observer felt that they were not as aware of the issue as they might be. As he tried to emphasize the non-involved, many members of the power clique grew dissatisfied with his activities.⁹

3. Not a miracle worker

The rationale proposes that a field worker can gather information that is useful to participants in helping them accomplish their goals. The evaluation team uses this information to help the school "solve" its problems.

We discovered that there is a danger that participants may expect too much from the ethnographer in the formative evaluator role. Because he is always around and people see him constantly asking questions and taking notes, they assume

that he has a thorough understanding of the community, that he can therefore solve their problems. There is a large likelihood of disappointment.

(Teacher) I think that a participant observer with training in anthropology, psychology, and education can be a valuable part of the evaluation of the program. However, I wonder if the information that he can supply is all that important and useful to the New School community itself in terms of the program's improvement.

(Student) Some [students] felt that there was a need for him [observer] to be knowledgeable in the fields of education, psychology and possibly anthropology.

"Being knowledgeable in education, psychology, and anthropology" probably meant skill in helping community members solve their problems. In fact, much of their interest in this kind of evaluation was the help it seemed to promise in working toward their goals, and they were disappointed in the field researcher's ability to help them.

Social intervention based on traditional research has been largely disappointing and critics are wondering just

what contribution social science can make. Unfortunately, holistic knowledge of a community or organization does not automatically translate into appropriate actions to be taken. Even innovative organizations may quickly evolve rigid structures which keep feedback information from having an effect. The ethnographer-evaluator is not a miracle worker.

4. Some kinds of information are harder to get than others

Psychologists are exploring the use of naturalistic observation to study behavioral dispositions such as attitudes and cognitive abilities. As explained in the section on rationale, many people doubt the sensitivity and generalizability of results drawn from paper and pencil instruments. They seek other, more comprehensive, methods of assessing both student abilities and affective orientations.

We discovered that participant observation was indeed a powerful technique for gathering reliable and valid information about student behavior changes. We also discovered, however, that the amount of energy required to gather this information almost precluded doing anything else. While a participant observer may be able to simultaneously gather information about a wide variety of issues, he must also decide on priorities. He will be able to collect less

complete information about low priority issues. This problem of priorities is especially severe when choosing between gathering data on more manifest focuses such as social interaction and more subtle, less overtly expressed focuses such as cognitive skills. A focus on the latter would leave little time for the former.

The evaluation team, field observer, and teacher-student evaluation committee of New School met early in the evaluation to decide what issues the investigation should focus on. Two of the issues selected were student learning (e.g., problem solving skills) and formation of school community, sense of belonging. The following observation illustrates the dilemma in choosing priorities in the field.

The observer was watching a science class. Students were proposing experiments they were going to do and soliciting help from fellow students and the teacher. Who interacted with whom and in what ways was significant data relevant to the school's goal of building a close, supportive community. What kinds of experiments were proposed, the reactions others offered, and the counter reactions of students were significant data about student learning and problem solving skills. The observer could not focus his attention on all

these events at the same time. Similarly, when he formulated the questions he wanted to informally ask the students or teacher after class, he could not ask about every issue he was interested in--e.g., why a certain student asked for help from some students and not from others or what a student thought when the teacher made the comment she did about a student proposed activity.

Ethnography in evaluation can give information about all kinds of issues. Those who seek to use it, however, will need to carefully examine the limits.

5. Can you study yourself?

In addition to helping the evaluation team design effective ways of presenting information to the school, it seems that the participant observer might be in an ideal position to evaluate the evaluators. He could observe how the school community responded to the activities set up by the evaluation team to help the community use the feedback and how the community actually used or failed to use the information. He could make suggestions for subsequent data collection and intervention activities.

We discovered that a participant observer cannot easily fulfill this role if he is also fulfilling all the others.

The participants tend to identify the observer with the evaluation team and may not be as candid with him about their reactions to the evaluation as they are about other matters.

B. Practical difficulties

Wolcott (1974) has outlined several criteria for excellence in the ideal ethnographic situation. In this section we will briefly outline some of the practical limits and constraints that we found to be a part of using ethnography in evaluation.

1. Assistance organizations with specialized skills, such as CNS, often find themselves asked to conduct evaluations in distant cities. Since contact between the evaluation team, field worker, and school community is an important part of the model, we found that limited contact--by mail, telephone and periodic visits--is insufficient. As the only member of the evaluation team actually present in the field, the researcher was subjected to many pressures and drains on his time--e.g., becoming public relations man for the whole project. And, over a long distance, it was difficult to co-ordinate the on-going use of participant observation data to shape the focus of the other aspects of the evaluation (e.g., tests, interviews) or for data emerging from the tests and interviews to be used by the observer as a focus for his

field work.

2. The greatest appeal of the model to school practitioners has been its promise of immediately useful feedback, and members of the school community asked the researcher to switch constantly from observer to participant. We had hoped to filter feedback primarily through the evaluation team, but the community wanted more continuous feedback. Our experiences suggest that at least two people are required in the field--the observer and an advisor-feedback specialist. The demands that are made on a single ethnographer-evaluator in the field can seriously impair his effectiveness and the strength of his low key participant-observer role.

3. The economic realities of money available for school evaluation often severely limits the ideal plans. Ideally, as Wolcott points out, ethnographers would have a long time in the field to build relationships, understand the community, develop tentative hypotheses and test emerging theories. They would ideally have a long time after field work to analyze what they had seen. Many of the schools to be studied do not have enough money to support a field worker for the ideal length of time. Moreover, they are so eager for the feedback they need that they cannot allow an ethnographer sufficient time to settle into the community or to analyze fully what has been observed. (See Lundin, Nelson and Gianotta, 1974 for another description of these different time frames.)

We attempted a compromise by using part-time observers for a single school year. Although this arrangement made unusual and difficult demands on the participant observer, we felt it better to have a continual and regular presence in the community rather than the fragmented spot visits that are typical of evaluation.

We asked the part-time observer to share his tentative thoughts with the community rather than withholding and testing his ideas. Still, this compromise caused problems. The school members felt they didn't see enough of the observer and he, in turn, felt that he didn't have enough time to do all that was called for in the model. The lack of funds also places limits on the skills and experience of the observer-evaluator a school can afford to hire.

Anyone working with similar time and funding limitations must understand these practical limits. An evaluation plan should either supply sufficient funds to support the observer over time or it should limit the focuses and functions that the observer is to serve.

4. Critics have become increasingly vocal in their demands that social scientists find ways to be responsive and useful to the people they study, especially anthropologists who work with the communities so intimately. Anthropologists who wish to be responsive to the communities under study

will face some conflict of values--that is, the community does not necessarily accept the rules, costs, or values of social science. This potential tension is especially great with ethnography, for the field researcher may appear not to be doing much that is different from other community members--he talks to people, attends classes, asks questions.

Community members observing this kind of research--especially when the community itself is paying for the evaluation--may wonder if their money is being well spent. Teachers and students at New School were aware that their money could have been spent on other priorities and they wished to see an immediate return. Undoubtedly, many ethnographers in the future will face this strange situation, being the employee of the people they are studying.

All of these very practical constraints and limitations must be taken into consideration when planning to use ethnography in evaluation programs.

III. Summary

Many people hope that the unique skills and perspectives of anthropologists can help them to make the contributions to social programs that have eluded other social scientists. Ethnography promises to make a significant contribution to evaluation of educational innovations. Before this promise can be realized, however, there are many practical and theoretical problems to be solved. In this article we have attempted to aid this process by candidly sharing and analyzing our experiences in this area of applied anthropology.

NOTES

¹ Anthropologists, of course, use a large variety of methods, including the tests, interviews and questionnaires traditionally used by evaluators. "Anthropological" used in these contexts, however, refers to participant observation and field interviewing--methods long considered the mainstay of anthropology. In this paper, "anthropological" and "ethnographic" will be used interchangeably to refer to the activities of the participant observer.

² We concentrate primarily on evaluation in educational settings, although most of our analysis would apply equally well to other settings.

³ The New School evaluation program was shaped both by the theoretical rationale and by practical constraints. For example, with CNS in Chicago and the school in Cleveland, only five visits could be made by the evaluation team. With a total budget of only \$8,700, CNS trained a college student to be the field researcher rather than hiring a professional.

⁴ We will use "evaluation team" throughout the paper to describe the CNS role in the evaluation. For lack of a more descriptive term, evaluation team should be read to mean facilitators, change agents, problem solvers and helpers as well as outside consultants on evaluation.

5 Alternative schools often attempt to introduce many innovations simultaneously. New School decided the evaluation should focus on the following innovations: 1. Responsibility--the planners hoped students would come to see education as something they have control over and not something that will terminate when they leave the school setting. 2. Involvement--planners hoped that students and teachers would build a community of learners and that students would share in running the school. 3. Learning--planners hoped that New School would open up possibilities for learning not typically available in schools. For example, use of outside resources, independent study, multidisciplinary courses.

6 We use school community to refer to the community life of the school itself as a sub-culture and not to the larger geographic community in which the school is located.

7 Some critics have claimed that ethnographers have strayed too far in the direction of trying to conduct studies without any prior focuses. Ethnographic studies actually can vary in how focused and theoretically prespecified they are--varying from completely prespecified and closed, as in traditional experimental design, to completely open and

atheoretical. In the evaluation studies we have conducted, we have placed ourselves somewhere in the middle of this continuum. We have derived "inquiry focuses" from general innovative program goals and from our knowledge of similar settings. Our initial orienting question is: what in the events or social system of this program can help to explain either the accomplishment or the failure of any particular goal? Thus, while not totally open, we have much latitude in persuing relevant data.

8 None of the evaluation studies we have conducted has been perfect. All those involved have experienced a mixture of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It would be impossible and undesirable to fix blame on particular groups, and undoubtedly all the principals could have performed their roles better--the field observers, the evaluation team, the school communities. We believe, however, that no matter how skillful those involved in these studies might be, they would confront many of the problems we discuss. For the sake of analysis we emphasize the difficulties. This analysis draws heavily on the candid reflections of teacher, student and field worker at New School.

9 It should be noted that the teacher and student papers we are quoting from the New School evaluation were written by members of the power clique. We have analyzed some of the reasons for this group's dissatisfaction with the field worker, and the dynamics of the situation should be considered when reading their comments. It would be impossible to determine how much their feelings were shared by other community members.

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